Jarom Thornton

Professor Goggins

ENG 556

26 April 2024

ENG 556 Final Assessment

Incarcerated individuals, depending on the crime committed, are typically given no chances of rehabilitation while serving their sentence or when they have reentered society. In the case of Curtis Carroll, there was never a chance of rehabilitation to begin with due to his upbringing in his community and their lack of literacy. Curtis “Wall Street” Carroll presented at a TED^{x} conference, discussing his journey from complete illiteracy (unable to read, write, or spell) to starting a program that helps incarcerated individuals become financially literate. Carroll states, “Financial literacy really did rule the world, and I was a child slave to it. (2:40-2:50). Using Linda Flower’s definition of community literacy and the concepts of neoliberalism, wicked problems, and “sponsors” of literacy, I analyze the struggles many prisoners and those in similar community’s face daily and what their options are to create a better learning environment for themselves and the youth of that culture.

In her book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Linda Flowers describes the importance of community or local literacy and its impact on citizens. She describes her type of community literacy as “an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify

as sites of struggles … It begins its work when [the] community … start naming and solving problems *together*. It does its work by widening the circle and constructing an even more public dialogue across differences of culture, class, discourse, race, gender, and power shaped by the explicit goals of discovery and change" (Flowers 19). Perhaps the most crucial part of this definition is "solving problems *together*" because when community members fail to uphold these dialogues where there are concerns, then education and understanding become crippled for those growing up in that environment. Curtis Carroll gives an example of this behavior in his speech, "…When I was released into the custody of my mother, the first words my uncle said was 'How'd you get caught?' I said, 'Man, the book bag was too heavy.' … 10 minutes later, he took me to burglarize another arcade game. We needed gas money to get home." (0:40-1:05) This story of Carroll's life is linked to the concept of sponsors and the role they can play in the community. Deborah Brandt, in her article "Sponsors of Literacy," describes literacy sponsors as "enable[ing] and hinder[ing] literacy activity, often forcing the formation of new literacy requirements while decertifying older ones" (Brandt 179). Sponsors can be organizations such as employers and universities; in this case, they can be community or family members. Since Carroll's uncle decided to teach him how to steal instead of read or write, he intentionally sent him down a path where education or financial literacy was not appreciated. The role sponsors can play on individuals must not be understated, especially since this sponsor of "literacy" is directly tied to the

home and community. While the uncle identified a ‘site of struggle’ for their family, he did not consider his nephew’s future and instead forced a different type of education upon Carroll. In these marginalized communities, sponsors can hold more power over the youth because of a lack of role models or opportunities usually gifted to others, such as after-school activities or school itself, in this case.

A second core concept closely related to community literacy and Carroll’s story is neoliberalism. Jennifer Clifton critiques the idea of neoliberalism in her book *Argument as Dialogue Across Difference: Engaging Youth in Public Literacies*. She states, “Overall, the primary strategy of neoliberalism is *privatization* … Neoliberalism is so dangerous in part because it shames those whom the market harms, blaming individuals for system failures, while removing any public means of correcting those systems” (Clifton 54-56). Relating this to Carroll and the beginning of his story, there was no support from his community nor the institutions that had a duty to his upbringing and a decent education. These sponsors, together with this system of neoliberalism, can severely limit and restrict the youth growing up in these marginalized communities to the point where they will be pigeonholed into only a few opportunities for survival. It is this idea of “blaming individuals for system failures” and then profiting off those failures by presenting them as lazy or uneducated when it is the system’s fault for not doing enough for the youth in these environments. (Clifton 56) Sponsors can grant or reject teaching literacies from individuals and then

combine this restriction with neoliberalism, and youth will have to navigate these difficult circumstances with little to no help while simultaneously attempting to present themselves in such a way as to appease those who control their education and movement in society. Carroll states later on, “A typical incarcerated individual would enter the California prison system with no financial education … Upon his parole … With no meaningful preparation or long-term financial plan, what does he do at 60? Get a good job, or go back to the very criminal behavior that led him to prison in the first place?” (7:50-8:30) This is what the system of neoliberalism is counting on, labeling individuals as criminals once they enter prison and then providing no meaningful rehabilitation services to help those who have wronged so they will always be labeled as criminals. This example can be grafted on entire communities to label them as problems without first identifying why they may not be able to contribute as much as their neighbors. Community literacy, for those in marginalized communities, is fighting an uphill battle against themselves, with corrupt sponsors, a system that prioritizes privatization and blaming the individual, and a lack of adequate resources for those who want to better themselves through education and literacy.

Finally, another concept closely linked to community literacy is ‘wicked problems,’ first defined by W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber in 1973. Jennifer Clifton uses this concept when she writes, “Wicked problems defy definition … Wicked problems cannot be solved in any traditional

sense. Instead, they can be addressed and, to some degree, limited or tamed … The social complexity and volatility of difference contribute to the 'wickedness' of a problem" (Clifton 131-132). Wicked problems, in other words, are the amalgamation of every system, political or social issue, community, illiteracy, and institution bearing down on individuals in a complex matter too difficult to "solve." When Clifton notes that these problems can be addressed or limited, I believe she is right in her assessment. Even a diversified interdisciplinary approach to what is probably a globalized issue can only lead to a small portion of the issue being tackled at any given moment. I would argue that Carroll understood this approach to his life and his community by creating his program for incarcerated individuals. Carroll states, "I was building a curriculum that could teach incarcerated men how to manage money through prison employment. Properly managing our lifestyle would provide transferrable tools that we can use to manage money when we reenter society." (5:30-5:50) Carroll created this program for his community, incarcerated men, so they would have the opportunity to better themselves when released from prison. "I now had an obligation to meet those on the path and help, and it was crazy because I now cared about my community." (6:40-6:55) Carroll understood that he could not fix the system or prevent individuals from committing crimes, but he did recognize that he could better prepare them for the world they would inhabit after they were released. These wicked problems that intertwine so many systems of oppression cannot be solved

by one solution, but they can be slowly broken down and tempered by countless individuals committing together for the future of themselves and others.

While Carroll's video narrative may be about his rise out of poverty through both financial and reading literacy, I would argue that it is also about community literacy and how Carroll's program for incarcerated individuals is a defining example as a sponsor of literacy and an example against the slow fight of wicked problems and neoliberalism. Once Carroll became literate, he was able to use that vital resource to build himself up through financial knowledge, and then he became a sponsor to those who had made the same mistake he had made. He did not attempt to fix the systems at large; he merely helped his community in a way he knew how to do, using the advantages he gained through literacy. He became a sponsor of literacy in his community, fighting against the system of neoliberalism by teaching financial literacy to inmates and thus slowly working against the wicked problem of incarcerated individuals in the United States.

Works Cited

Brandt, Deborah. “Sponsors of Literacy.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1998, pp. 165–85, https://doi.org/10.2307/358929.

Clifton, Jennifer. *Argument as Dialogue Across Difference: Engaging Youth in Public Literacies*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2016, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315619590.

Carroll, Curtis. “How I Learned to Read -- and Trade Stocks -- in Prison | Curtis ‘Wall Street’ Carroll.” *YouTube*, TED, 18 May 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F89eycANUrQ&ab_channel=TED.

Flower, Linda. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

Horst W. J. Rittel, and Melvin M. Webber. “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” *Policy Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1973, pp. 155–69, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730.